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Committee probes reports of contra drug smuggling

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 ✓ By Doyle McManus
 and Ronald J. Ostrów
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WASHINGTON — The Senate Foreign Relations Committee is investigating reports that Nicaraguan contras and their American supporters have helped smuggle cocaine into the United States, although Drug Enforcement Administration officials say their agents have found no evidence to support the allegations.

Dozens of cocaine stories have followed the contras for several years. Witnesses have alleged that the rebels helped cocaine tycoons ship drugs or that the rebels financed their war with money from drug smuggling. According to one account, some of the planes that secretly carried guns to the contras also brought cocaine back to the United States.

None of the allegations has been confirmed or fully corroborated. But the accumulation of allegations has prompted the Senate panel to hire a special counsel to organize a formal inquiry, attracted the attention of the U.S. attorney's office in Miami, and compelled the DEA to begin a review of the issue.

"I believe that there is no question, based on things we have heard, that contras and the contra infrastructure have been involved in the cocaine trade and in bringing cocaine into Florida," said Jack Blum, the Senate committee's special counsel. "Were these operations a way for the contras to raise funds or were they free-lance operations? That's a question I can't resolve."

The main force pressing for an investigation has been Sen. John F. Kerry (D., Mass.), a member of the Foreign Relations Committee who has been one of the contras' most relentless critics.

Inquiries criticized

Department of Justice officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, have asserted that Kerry's investigation of the drug charges has interfered with their inquiries. In turn,

Kerry's aides say privately that the department has failed to pursue evidence of contra misconduct, fearing damage to one of President Reagan's most cherished foreign policy initiatives.

To win the approval of the rest of the Foreign Relations Committee, Kerry agreed that the inquiry would cover the gamut of drug-smuggling issues in the Caribbean, including allegations that Nicaragua's leftist regime has itself been involved in the cocaine trade.

It is also an issue with intensely political implications. A proven link between the contras and cocaine could doom the Reagan administration's effort to win continued funding for the rebels. The administration and the contras have strongly denied any connection between the rebels and the drug trade.

"We have nothing to do with cocaine — nothing at all," Adolfo Calero, the leader of the largest contra military organization, said in a recent interview. "We are against it. And we would be crazy to try it. It would be the end of our support in this country."

The State Department has acknowledged that some contra associates have been involved in cocaine trafficking, but it insists that none of the rebel leaders or their organizations knowingly engaged in the drug trade.

'No evidence'

"There has been no evidence that organizations associated with the major resistance umbrella group, the United Nicaraguan Opposition, have participated in or benefited from drug trafficking," a State Department report concluded last year. "Instead, the available evidence points to involvement with drug traffickers by a limited number of persons having various kinds of affiliations with, or political sympathies for, resistance groups."

"There are some 20,000 members of the several active armed groups in the Nicaraguan democratic resistance," the report said. "In such a

large cross section, it is inevitable that there will be some who have had drug connections."

Last month, the DEA began a review of the drug allegations and reminded its field agents that the administration does not want to be caught unaware by a new scandal. "We watch this as closely as we watch anything in this agency, to make sure we're not missing anything," said Judith E. Bertini, a DEA intelligence specialist who is supervising the review. "Agents have been alerted to the importance of this."

For all the charges and countercharges, the DEA says it has yet to find a credible drug case against the contra organizations. "There could be drug traffickers providing money to the contras, but because they're personally sympathetic, not because they're in drugs to support a cause," Bertini said. "To say they're doing dope to support a cause — no."

Moreover, federal officials say, the investigations have been complicated by increasing numbers of drug defendants who are asserting that they acted on behalf of the contras or the U.S. government, in hopes that the contention would tie up their prosecution.

The allegations

The main allegations:

• Guns for cocaine: Two drug smugglers convicted in Miami insist that their cocaine shipments from Costa Rica were part of an operation to finance contra operations — and insist that they were helped by the CIA and the DEA. "It was guns down, cocaine back," convicted pilot Gary Betzner told the Associated Press in Miami. "Absolutely not true," the DEA's Bertini said. The man who allegedly hired Betzner, Jorge Morales, threatened to disclose the details of the ring if he was not granted immunity from prosecution. But, when the government refused, Morales pleaded guilty without naming

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any names. "We want him to talk," said Anna Bennett, a spokeswoman for the U.S. attorney's office in Miami. "We can't prosecute a 'they.' We can't indict people on the basis of an unsupported allegation."

• The Barranquilla shipments: Administration and congressional sources say a witness has told the FBI of watching as cocaine was loaded aboard a Southern Air Transport cargo plane in Barranquilla, Colombia, in 1983 and of observing a similar operation in 1985. Other sources have said Southern Air provided aircraft for the contras' cargo shipments, and flight records indicate that some of the same planes landed in Central America and Colombia. Southern Air's attorney, Robert M. Beckman, said the charge is false. "I have asked every investigative body, and each one has told us: Southern Air Transport is not a target of any investigation," he said. A Department of Justice official said that the witness had taken a lie-detector test, but that the results were inconclusive.

• The Ilopango ring: Congressional investigators say they have seen unconfirmed reports that some of the crewmen on planes that carried guns from El Salvador's Ilopango air base to the contras may have carried drugs back into the United States.

The DEA's Bertini said the drug agency has "checked every which way" and has seen no evidence to back up the reports.

• The Avirgan lawsuit: Two freelance journalists in Costa Rica, Tony Avirgan and Martha Honey, have alleged in a lawsuit that the contras helped ship "thousands of kilograms of cocaine" from Colombia to Florida through a Costa Rican ranch. The ranch's American owner, John Hull, has acknowledged helping the contras but denied any connection with drug operations. Said Bertini: "There's nothing (in the DEA's files) to reflect that."

• The Bermudez allegation: Congressional investigators said the Department of Justice has received an unconfirmed report from foreign officials that Enrique Bermudez, the contras' top military commander, narrowly escaped arrest during a cocaine raid in Honduras. According to the report, the Hondurans believed that Bermudez "had been actively trafficking in cocaine." A contra spokesman denied the allegation; the DEA said it knew nothing of it.

Senate hearings on the drug charges are expected to begin next month.